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ABSTRACT

As part of the Victorian Certificate of General Education for Adults (CGEA) in Australia, a project involves students in writing, editing, and distributing The World Times, a student newspaper. Due to a lack of funds, the Internet has become an alternative means of publication, and the@LBE-ELECTRONIC (@LBE-E) World Wide Web site has become a new way for students to develop literacy skills. The class uses two personal computers connected to the Internet, several full access accounts, and a few other personal computers used offline.@LBE-E is divided into seven sections that cover the four literacies model central to CGEA: general editorial, personal issues and problems; current affairs; film, video, and book reviews; local issues; the world of work; and soap opera gossip. Each student takes responsibility for editing a section. The leap from print-based to electronic literacies is disconcerting for students and teachers. Electronic mail content is sometimes limited to the occasional request for "pen pals" or an argumentative issue that sets out to provoke a response. This latter tendency has hampered the building of dialogues. In student writing, a synthesis of abstract thought and personal voice appear, suggesting that students are in search of a reply and discourse. To introduce students to the World Wide Web, the teacher uses metaphors and lay terms to describe Hypertext Markup Language and how it works. (YLB)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

The story of @LBE-ELECTRONIC:

Adult literacy students publish on the Net

Dale Pobega is an ALBE and ESL teacher working at Duke Street Community House as well as two other community learning centres in Melbourne's western suburbs. He is currently teaching a CGEA course within the Writing and Technology class described in this article. During 1993-95 he was editor of *Fine Print*, the journal of the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council and has managed *The World Times* student newspaper project for the last five years.

Beginnings

In 1995, I began looking at ways of getting students more directly involved in the production process of *The World Times* (*TWT*), a student newspaper I have edited for the last five years. I had planned to produce a General Curriculum Option as part of the Victorian Certificate of General Education for Adults (CGEA) which could be delivered across the state and involve students in writing, editing and even distributing *TWT* on a collaborative basis. My plan was to take advantage of *TWT* as a showcase for student writing, and a focus of community building amongst ALBE learners. Unlike their counterparts in the English as a second language (ESL), school and tertiary sectors, there are few forums in which ALBE students can work on joint projects, communicate or share their experiences and ideas.

In 1995, that idea to extend the range of the student newspaper project led me to investigate the possible uses of the Internet. A project which would enable students to collaboratively research, write, edit, use computers, learn simple publishing programs and participate in — or at least get to understand — the complex processes behind the distribution of a publication seemed a perfect vehicle for covering the literacies central to the CGEA as well as the seven Mayer Key Competencies:

- collecting, analysing and organising ideas;
- communicating ideas and information;
- planning and organising activities;
- working with others and in teams;
- using mathematical ideas and techniques;
- solving problems; and
- using technology.

The difficulties which plagued the continuation of *TWT* — mainly due to non-availability of funds — have now led to the Internet as an alternative medium for the realisation of that project. Ironically, the sad disappearance of *TWT* as a print-based text and main focus of the CGEA project has ushered in @LBE-ELECTRONIC, an "electronic surrogate" and a new and exciting way for students to develop their literacy skills.

From paper to the PC

I currently teach the class with a bare minimum of two PCs connected to the Internet, a couple of full access accounts (kindly sponsored by VICNET and the Adult Literacy Research Network Node for Victoria), and a few other PCs which we use off-line, which are capable of running HTML editors, browsers and email programs. A recently-purchased scanner has been put to optimal use for designing home page mastheads, generally sprucing up our Website pages and reproducing artwork for the upcoming Grand Opening of the @LBE-E Cyber Gallery.

There are usually eight to ten students in a class and therefore not enough computers to go around, yet we manage to work around the lack of resources. "Official" class time is restricted to three hours a week — a limitation the students have rebelled against, choosing instead to come into the centre at different times during the week on an informally supervised "self access" basis to continue their work.

> "The e-zine has been a success in terms of the students' achievement in multi-generic writing, engaging with technology and working as an editorial team."

Our computer lab is small and connections to the Net are often shaky, slow or sometimes inoperative (in which case we resort to off-line work). You can judge for yourself what you think of the @LBE ELECTRONIC site (**http://www.vicnet.net.au/~twt**). In the eight to ten months in which it has been evolving, I personally feel our electronic magazine (or "e-zine") @LBE-E has been a success in terms of the students' achievement in multi-generic writing, engaging with technology and working collaboratively as an editorial team.

@LBE-E is divided into seven sections, which I ensured would cover the four literacies model which is central to the CGEA:

- General Editorial;
- Personal Issues and Problems;
- Current Affairs;
- Film, Video and Book Reviews;
- Local Issues;
- The World of Work; and
- Soap Opera Gossip.

Each student takes responsibility for editing a section. Hardcopy versions of the e-zine and invitations to respond to its student-authored sections are posted on classroom walls for all to read. It's also the editor's duty to collect any responses from class members, students from other Duke Street classes, or students who may have responded by email. The seven sections, as well as the student editor concept, is based on an excellent ESL e-zine, *WINGS*, produced by students at the University of Washington. Visit *WINGS* at **http://weber.u.washington.edu/~wings/**

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I had downloaded an issue of *WINGS* for my students. Enthusiastically, they emailed their responses, unfortunately just as the long summer vacation began in the northern hemisphere. Naturally, there was no reply. The students' other efforts at emailing the local LISTSERV discussion group for ALBE students established by the Adult Literacy Research Network Node for Victoria (ALRNNV) had at that stage also been disappointing. Empty email boxes were the order of the day. The class was experiencing a minor crisis of confidence — the excitement was apparent, the technology was working, however, there seemed to be little feedback to keep motivation rolling. The initial failure on my part to utilise the full potential of email in the earlier stages of the course led me to rethink my approach.

The Writing and Technology class at Duke Street Community House. Pictured with students are: House coordinator Bronwyn Merrigan (front, standing behind chair); and Dale Pobega (rear, at right).

The leap from print-based to electronic literacies is disconcerting, not only for students, but also for teachers. For example, there is much talk about email being a means of reviving the epistolary tradition in our culture. That tradition is based very much on correspondents establishing a highly personal, dialogic relationship. In recent years, there has been a marked swing away from the teaching of such "personal genres" in ALBE — a reaction no doubt to the progressivist trends of the 1970s and early 80s in which any literacy which was not "organic" or originating in the "subject" was not valued, or worse still, not explicitly taught. The trend may also be a consequence of the contemporary demise of the personal letter, a "who writes letters any more?" logic that has led to a near abandonment of the practice in favour of the telephone.

The production of argumentative texts are now highly favoured in ALBE classrooms, the idea being that "learning to argue" will somehow infallibly move students towards thinking which is more complex and abstract, and less illogical and emotive. This concept is overloaded with assumptions about the power of argument (or at least exaggerates the cultural role of public debate) and does not recognise the ways in which personal voice in writing is the essence which makes for fruitful email exchange and relationship building — on LISTSERVs at least.

I discovered this as my own students embarked on their email projects in the initial stages of the Writing and Technology class. They posted to two LISTSERVs, the City University of New York literacy learner list, and the local ALRNNV student list (**albe@vicnet.net.au**) which both suffer from the same problems — firstly, a real lack of students; and secondly, content which is confined to the occasional request for "keypals" or else an argumentative issue written by students which sets out to provoke a response from others. This latter tendency, in particular, seems to have led to a series of dead-ends as far as building dialogue on the list is concerned.

In a posting to the ALRNNV ALBE teacher list recently, Bill Daly, a practitioner from Victoria University of Technology, observed that:

> **"Web pages are probably the contemporary equivalent to print, given their (semi) permanence, univocality and autonomy, formal structure, layout, etc., while email seems to have some inherently oral qualities to it, especially in its structures and topics and the way its users frequently strive to replicate patterns of speech and dialogue in their exchanges. Yet ironically, the ALBE list is full of fixed, autonomous, univocal text, while the [@LBE-ELECTRONIC Website] appears collaborative, multi-vocal, multi-generic, multi-topic, dialogic... I think it's the variety of genres and the variety of topics that you included that achieves this... It is also clearly the fact that there's a plurality of writers present. The ALBE list has different writers too, of course, but perhaps just one ultimate author, the CGEA document's 'Public Debate' section."**
>
> **(Adult Literacy LISTSERV posting 30/7/96 — adult_literacy@fox.vut.edu)**

Similarly, an earlier dialogue between a group of North American teachers within the Net Texts Project at RhetNet, a cyber-journal dealing with issues of rhetoric and writing, had me thinking critically about changing my approach to the teaching of email. We should aim to get students establishing an ongoing and personally meaningful dialogue with one another or some other interested correspondent. Daly's point of view is important — taking advantage of email's "inherent orality", rather than replicating the formal, print-bound voice of text, is a significant ingredient central to successful mailing lists.

One of the North Americans claimed that he had tried:

> **"to develop email exercises for [his] students which would draw upon their natural curiosity to find out more from a correspondent and pull them into communicating in writing... One problem is that the pen-pal type set-ups are often unsuccessful since there is no clear goal."**
>
> **(RhetNet, "Net Texts: Literacy and Assimilation", posting 6/6/96 http://www.missouri.edu/~wleric/rhetnet/rhetnet.html)**

I mentioned earlier that one of the sections of @LBE-E is called "The World of Work". This section is based on student responses to Rob McCormack's ALBE reader of the same name (McCormack 1992). Interestingly, this was the most popular section of the first issue of our ▶

page 16

Technical terms explained

HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) is a simple coding language which uses tags to control the way a Web page is displayed. An HTML editor is a software program which enables tags to be inserted in a document without typing.

A **LISTSERV** is a program set up on a server which handles distribution of email to multiple-member mailing lists. For more information about the ALRNNV LISTSERV project, see the article by Syed Javed on page 14.

e-zine. The students had responded very positively to reading this book as a background history to the technology with which they were engaging and the manner in which this technology affected their personal, work and family lives. The students were inspired to write to the author — using email. They were particularly moved by some of the early autobiographical sections, and wanted to know more about the McCormack clan, or share their own or family experiences of work and hardship with the author.

It was that "curious, purposeful sort of correspondence" the North American teacher alluded to above that I should have had the students pursue much more rigorously than I did. Rob responded to some of the email postings and a good deal of excitement was generated. For a while, meaningful correspondence was being developed between my students and the author.

As is apparent in the student writing (right), the first an editorial, the second an email letter, a synthesis of abstract thought and personal voice appear, suggesting that a depersonalised, argumentative position does not necessarily have to be adopted to communicate a complex response to the material students were reading and writing about in the classroom. On the contrary, although Steve Troy's editorial stands alone, and appears more formally text-bound, it is nonetheless soliciting a reader response. Students participating in my class are very keen to produce their editorials for the very reason that they are in search of a reply, looking to discourse with others about their learning.

The right metaphors and Web pages on paper

I had introduced the students to the World Wide Web (WWW) and designed a simple list of commands for teaching them to log on and off the Internet. They learned about hyperlinks, search engines and how to use them, as well as the browser they were using, Netscape Navigator, and its simpler functions including bookmarking, saving text, copying images, and printing pages. I produced a simple student manual of screen shots for students to follow and designed a Web page with some simple exercises that I uploaded on the Net that they could easily access and practise on. This little "test page" also acted as a handy instrument for evaluating their progress. The students were beginning to use their email facility more purposefully and were learning to use the WWW to research topics rather than aimlessly surfing from one site to another. But how were they going to learn Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) in order to produce Web pages?

HTML is a simple command language employing tags which allow the browser (and to a lesser extent the server) to read text and image files and make sense of the internal links within a document and pathways to documents elsewhere on the Internet.

Like most of us, our adult students have grown up almost entirely in print-based environments and with little or no knowledge of computer coding. I knew it was going to be a question of finding simple metaphors and lay terms which could easily describe HTML and how it worked. I also needed to devise a method that simply showed students what a Web page was made up of in terms of its two "layers" — its HTML source file and the rendition of that source file as a Web page by a browser such as Netscape Navigator.

I started by having the students ignore the idea of the HTML editing process altogether and using their hand-written texts in a fun "cut and paste" exercise. They cut up their stories into paragraphs and stuck them down on coloured sheets of A3 paper. I had made cut-outs of the simple tags they would have to learn to apply to their text, such as:

<TITLE> </TITLE>
<HEAD></HEAD>
<BODY></BODY>
<P></P>

We thought of the tags as being like the paper clothes you hang off a paper doll — the words and images being the doll's body. Students worked in pairs, cutting and pasting and adding tags as necessary. By the end of a lesson they had a rather beautiful looking "Web page on paper" that they could then use as a guide when it came to transferring their work into an HTML editor. Word processing and laying out directly into an editing program proved to be too big a conceptual leap for the students. I found the "Web page on paper" process an effective bridging text between print and HTML and also a way of clarifying techniques and basic commands.

The difference between the family in agricultural society and industrial society

From the editor, Steven Troy

In Rob McCormack's book, *The World of Work*, the differences between the family in agricultural society and industrial society were:

- the family in the agricultural society was more loving and close;
- work in the agricultural society could be done anytime depending on the seasons but work in industrial society has to be done in factories. Work had to be done on time, by the clock. So the family had to move to town to be near the factories; and
- the father went to the factory, the mother stayed home, the kids went to school to learn, the grandparents were sent off to nursing homes or sent to live on their own.

This was the start of the nuclear family with mother and father, two or three children.

Work and home was split between the two. Work at home was not paid. "Work in the factories was streamlined according to specific jobs and specific times". (Taylor's idea)

Even if you felt depressed or your mother had died or you felt happy — none of these things mattered. You were supposed to keep them out of your work.

Do you think this is true and accurate? If you do not share this opinion please to write to me.

Letter to the author about the family

Dear Rob

I am writing to you a letter about a story in your book *The World of Work*. I really enjoy the part about the traditional family and the nuclear family because it reminds me of my own family in my country, El Salvador. I'm the fourth of a family of 12. We lived in the country. My father worked in the field planting on his own and cultivating crops. When it was ready my brothers helped him in the field. My sisters and I helped my Mum at home doing cleaning and cooking. These years were very happy for me. After that, I went to live in the city and it was different for me because I was used to country life. I really enjoyed your book and look forward to hearing from you.

Celia Rosa

These student writings can be found at **http://www.vicnet.net.au/~twt/world_work.htm**

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A "Web page on paper" created by Maria Oblati, student editor of the "Local Issues" section of @LBE-ELECTRONIC.

Advantages of electronic publishing

There are several advantages of using the electronic medium over print-based student publishing.

The electronic environment has proven to be a more flexible and convenient one for students learning to write and publish their own work. Provided that proper teacher support is in place, learning HTML and how to use an HTML editor can be relatively easy for students. The process of learning the multiple operations and tools within even the most simple desktop publishing programs is by contrast, much more difficult. Overall, Web page construction is, or can be made — contrary to popular belief — relatively simple and the end product can appear extremely professional. This professional, bona-fide quality of the end product is important for adult learners whom I feel expect more than a "cardboard and staples number" as a document of individual or group effort.

> "The electronic environment has proven to be more flexible and convenient than print for students learning to write and publish their own work."

Another plus for students is that finding and using copyright-free graphic material is far less problematical in cyberspace than it is in the "real world". Many Websites provide GIF and JPEG images which the public can copy and re-use within reasonable limits. Alternatively, seeking permission from an author or artist to reproduce or use material can result in an almost immediate response via email. Converting clip art to readable graphic files for the Web is also fairly straightforward. Netscape Navigator allows any surfer to copy and save image files embedded in any Web page they come across.

Easy-to-use Internet search engines such as Alta Vista (**http://www.altavista.com**) or Web Crawler (**http://www.webcrawler.com**) open up an infinite library for student research which can be used productively, provided students approach a search task with a clearly defined goal or topic in mind.

Although the processes of uploading pages to a server are beyond the ability of most students, a teacher can assume the task within her role as editor-in-chief. I am presently working on ways to teach the process in a simplified manner to one or two "advanced" students in the group, adding to their repertoire so that they, in turn, can act as informal tutors to others within the class.

The downside of electronic publishing

Electronic publishing does, however have some disadvantages over a print-based approach.

Firstly, there's the obvious fact that few ALBE programs, community centres or even college departments have Internet access readily available for either staff or student use. The expense of investing in a new computer or upgrading hardware, or of taking an account with an Internet service provider is probably prohibitive to many (and, I might add, a contentious point when weighing up the overall value of Internet access as a tool for various forms of professional development and community use). Consequently, the idea of publishing for, by and with students on the WWW and the prospect of building an ALBE community on the Net may still be some way off.

For students actively producing and publishing for the Web, there is currently an "audience problem" and the frustration of getting few responses to the work they choose to showcase on-line. My students, for example realise that there are only a handful of other ALBE students who will see their work or respond to it. Nonetheless, their audience remains the "imagined one" of other students like themselves, or ESL students usually at secondary or tertiary level. Of course, there is the added incentive of the students feeling they are pioneers in the field doing important work — which they are.

The interest and computer literacy levels of teachers themselves can also be a problem. There are few ALBE teachers trained or possessing adequate knowledge of the Internet to feel confident about integrating these new communication technologies into their classrooms. A recent study conducted by a colleague, Phil Marsh, in Melbourne's western suburbs, showed that 61 per cent of providers surveyed "could not access the Internet without assistance". And almost half the respondents said they had never used email (Marsh 1996).

The ALRNNV Adult Literacy LISTSERV for teachers (**adult_literacy@fox.vut.edu.au**) located at the Victoria University of Technology comprises less than 60 subscribers after over a year in operation. This is not a reflection on the major effort which has gone into the development of the ALRNNV list, but perhaps rather an indication of how under-resourced and lacking in professional development opportunities teachers in the ALBE field actually are.

Judging by the origins of postings to be found on several other international lists such as NETEACH (**http://thecity.sfsu.edu/~funweb/neteach.htm**) and sites for discussing literacy and language issues such as the RhetNet conference MOO (**mediamoo.media.mit.edu.8888**), my own observations lead me to conclude that Australian ALBE ▶

over

Technical terms explained

GIF and **JPEG** stand for Graphic Interchange Format and Joint Photographic Experts Group. These are two common standards for compressing images used on the Internet.

A **MOO** ("Multi-user Dimension Object Oriented" environment) is a program which allows users to connect to a shared virtual space of rooms and other objects where they can communicate in real time. Many MOOs are role-play oriented.

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The story of @LBE-ELECTRONIC from page 17

teachers barely feature in the discourse on literacy which is thriving on the Internet (unless they are "lurking" and not actually participating in discussions!).

Has the digital revolution passed us by?

Truly inspiring educational projects on the Internet seem to exist at extreme ends of the spectrum relative to where ALBE is positioned. Most pedagogical work involving new communications technology is being conducted in the well (or at least better) resourced schools, college departments and language institutes. Many of the students on-line are already advantaged both socioeconomically and technologically; staff are better trained in well-resourced environments and lastly, a reasonable perception exists that new communications technologies are not essentially relevant to ALBE students.

It may be true that at entry level, the technologies mentioned above are inappropriate. Mastering the simple technology of handwriting may, in many cases, be sufficiently challenging for a time. Even amongst students at higher levels, building what may appear to be sophisticated technological empires in the classroom (assuming the resources are available) may be counter-productive and a disincentive to computer-based learning altogether. However, I hope that this outline of what happens in my Writing and Technology class at a small community house suggests possibilities which could be taken further and developed by a teacher more talented than myself. I believe the Internet is a powerful instrument for student learning and literacy development that should not be ignored. Allowing the digital revolution to pass us by is a mistake that we can ill afford. Our ALBE classrooms are threatened by computer hacks and charlatans who, given half a chance, would have our students cooped up behind computer terminals being subjected to facile "spell it right" programs and senseless "checklist learning" exercises. Now is the time to start our own learning because the survival of our group-oriented, classroom-centred pedagogy depends upon it.

For more information contact Dale Pobega on (03) 9311 9973. Fax: (03) 9310 1622.
Email: dalep@tiger.vut.edu.au

The @LBE ELECTRONIC Website and Dale's ALBE Teacher Website are at http://www.vicnet.net.au/~twt Dale's site has an excellent bibliography of adult literacy and language sites. The Duke Street Community House Website is at http://www.vicnet.net.au/~dukest

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